MARVEL
MIDNIGHT SONS
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MIDNIGHT SONS
UNLIMITED
THREE
STRANGE
TALES
DIRECT EDITION
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Three STRANGE TALES of the

MIDNIGHT SONS

"NECROMANCING"

Written by DAVID QUINN

Introduction/Framing Sequence
MARK TENNEY — Penciler
RICHARD RANKIN — Inker
LORINA MAPA — Letterer
MIKE WORLEY — Colorist

Chapter One: "To Seek the Shaman's Secret"
MARIE SEVERIN — Artist
GAIL BECKETT — Letterer
MARIE SEVERIN — Colorist

Chapter Two: "Night of the Bloodpack"
GENE COLAN — Penciler
DAVE SIMONS — Inker
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Chapter Three: "A Love Supreme"
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Dedicated to STAN LEE and STEVE DITKO

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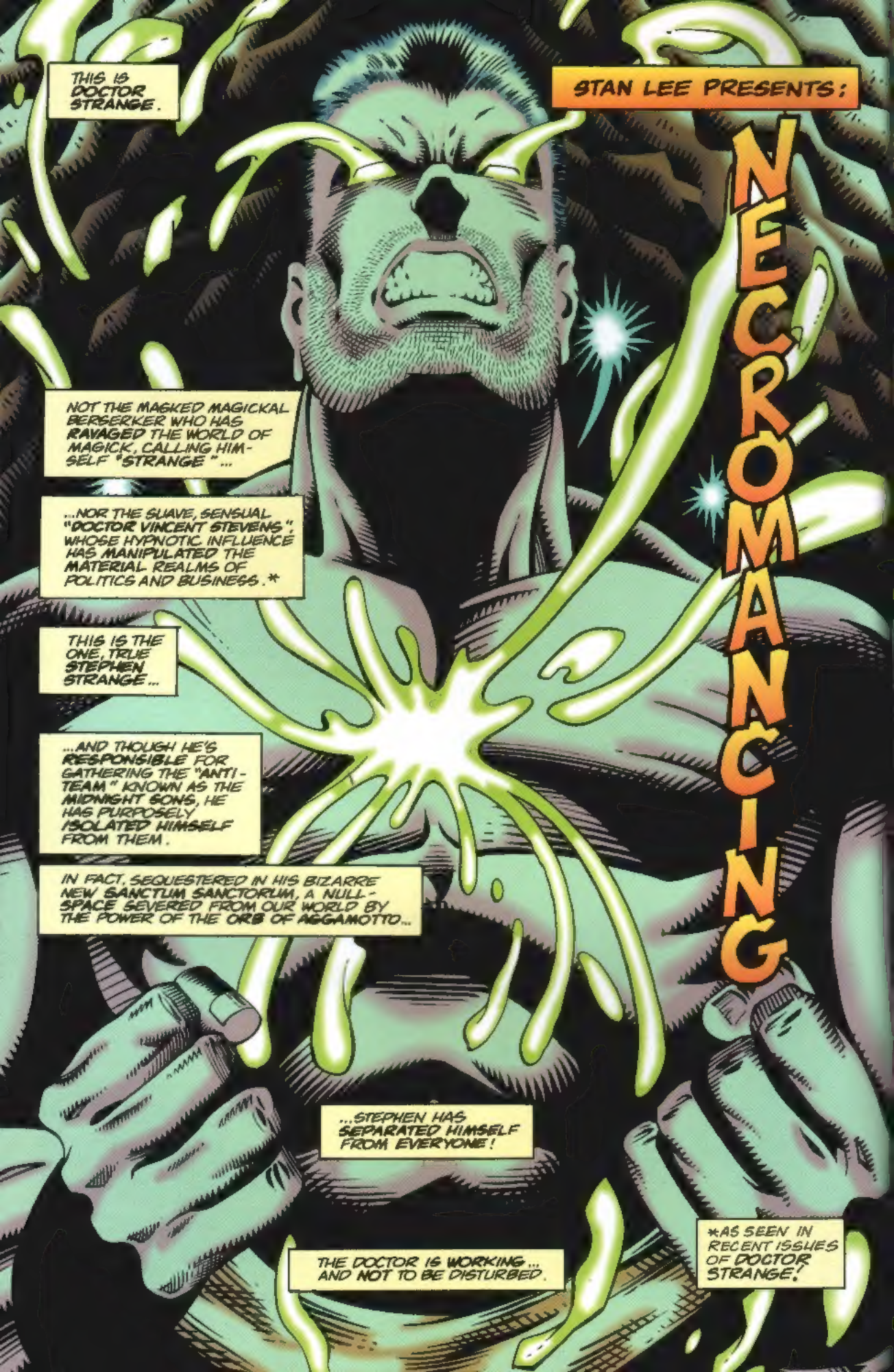
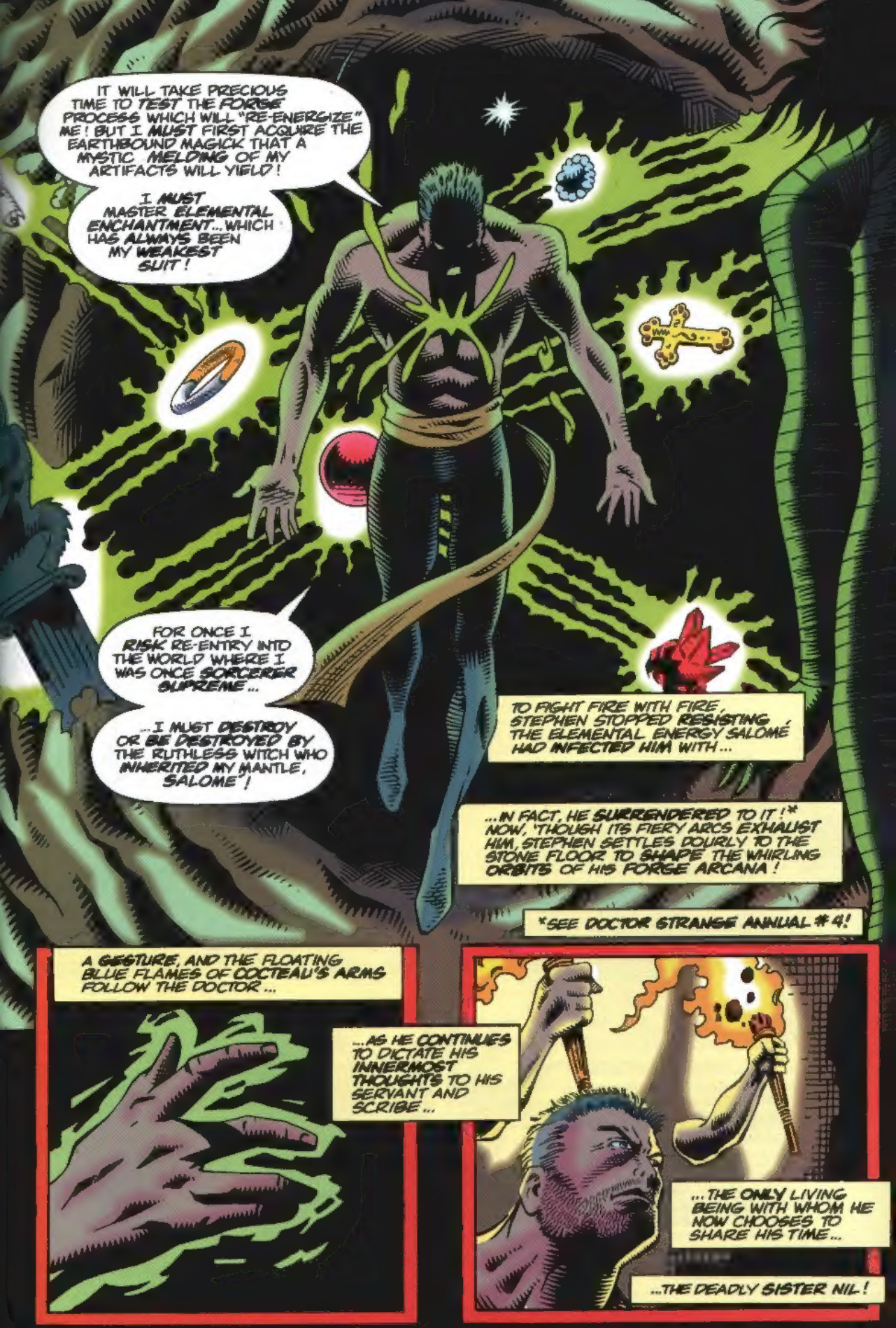
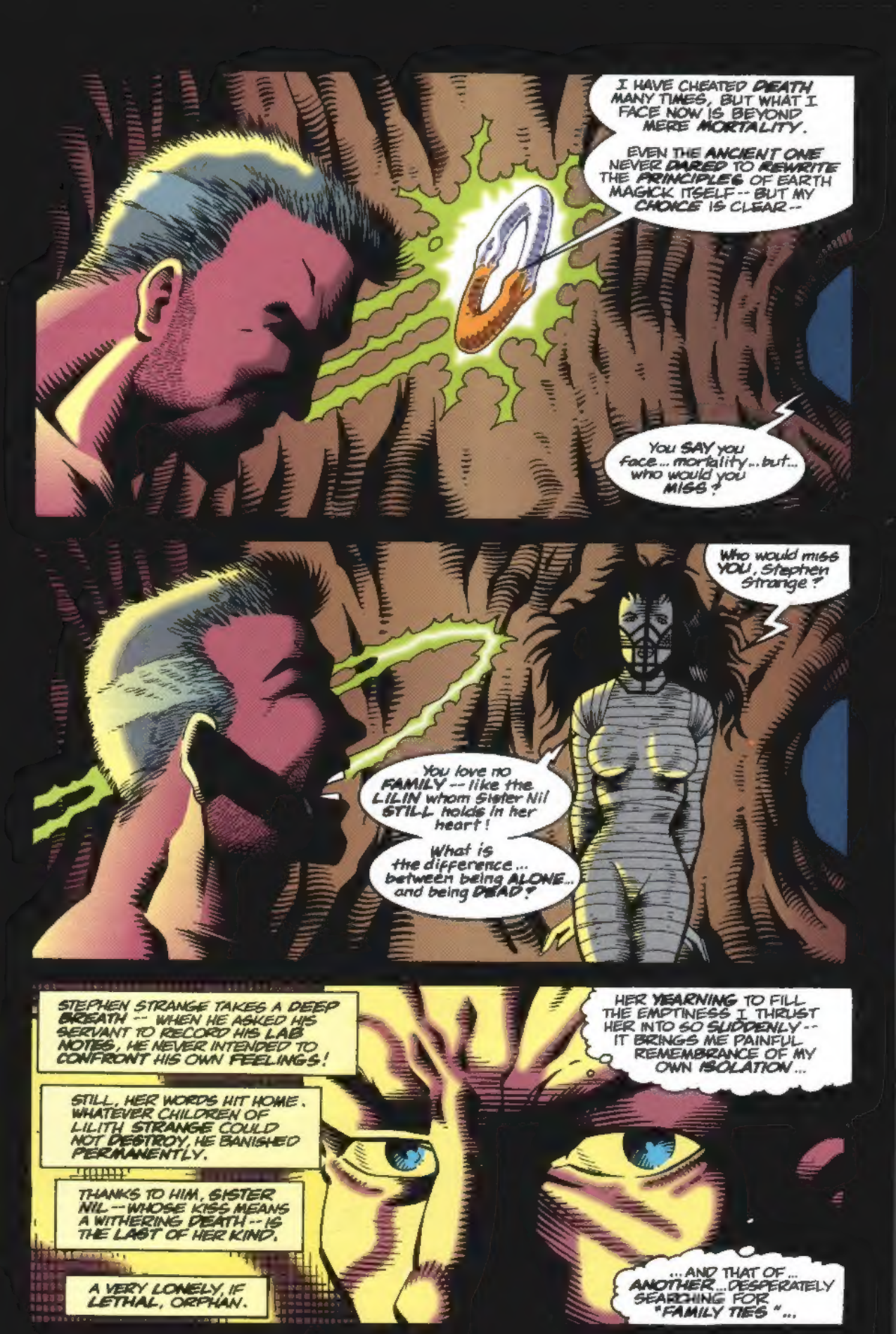
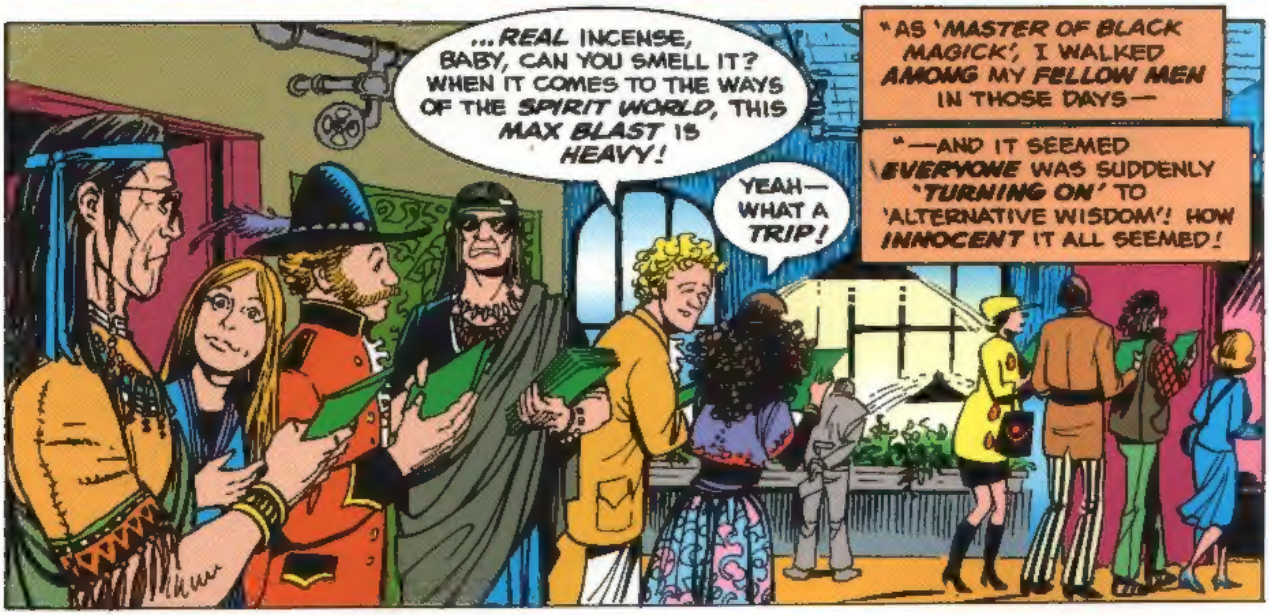

THIS IS DOCTOR STRANGE.
STAN LEE PRESENTS:
NECROMANCING
NOT THE MASKED MAGICKAL BERSERKER WHO HAS RAVAGED THE WORLD OF MAGICK, CALLING HIMSELF "STRANGE"...
...NOR THE SUAVE, SENSUAL "DOCTOR VINCENT STEVENS", WHOSE HYPNOTIC INFLUENCE HAS MANIPULATED THE MATERIAL REALMS OF POLITICS AND BUSINESS.*
THIS IS THE ONE, TRUE STEPHEN STRANGE...
...AND THOUGH HE'S RESPONSIBLE FOR GATHERING THE "ANTI-TEAM" KNOWN AS THE MIDNIGHT SONS, HE HAS PURPOSELY ISOLATED HIMSELF FROM THEM.
IN FACT, SEQUESTERED IN HIS BIZARRE NEW SANCTUM SANCTORUM, A NULL-SPACE SEVERED FROM OUR WORLD BY THE POWER OF THE ORB OF AGGAMOTTO...
...STEPHEN HAS SEPARATED HIMSELF FROM EVERYONE!
THE DOCTOR IS WORKING... AND NOT TO BE DISTURBED.
*AS SEEN IN RECENT ISSUES OF DOCTOR STRANGE!


IT WILL TAKE PRECIOUS TIME TO TEST THE FORGE PROCESS WHICH WILL "RE-ENERGIZE" ME! BUT I MUST FIRST ACQUIRE THE EARTHBOUND MAGICK THAT A MYSTIC MELDING OF MY ARTIFACTS WILL YIELD!
I MUST MASTER ELEMENTAL ENCHANTMENT... WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY WEAKEST SUIT!
FOR ONCE I RISK RE-ENTRY INTO THE WORLD WHERE I WAS ONCE SORCERER SUPREME...
...I MUST DESTROY OR BE DESTROYED BY THE RUTHLESS WITCH WHO INHERITED MY MANTLE, SALOME'!
TO FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE, STEPHEN STOPPED RESISTING THE ELEMENTAL ENERGY SALOMÉ HAD INFECTED HIM WITH...
...IN FACT, HE SURRENDERED TO IT!* NOW, THOUGH ITS FIERY ARCS EXHAUST HIM, STEPHEN SETTLES DOURLY TO THE STONE FLOOR TO SHAPE THE WHIRLING ORBITS OF HIS FORGE ARCANA!
*SEE DOCTOR STRANGE ANNUAL #4!
A GESTURE, AND THE FLOATING BLUE FLAMES OF COCTEAU'S ARMS FOLLOW THE DOCTOR...
...AS HE CONTINUES TO DICTATE HIS INNERMOST THOUGHTS TO HIS SERVANT AND SCRIBE...
...THE ONLY LIVING BEING WITH WHOM HE NOW CHOOSES TO SHARE HIS TIME...
...THE DEADLY SISTER NIL!

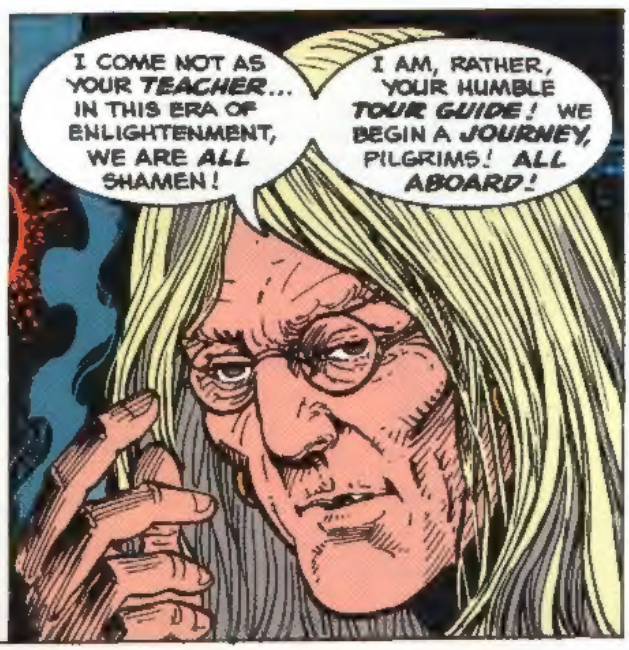

I HAVE CHEATED DEATH MANY TIMES, BUT WHAT I FACE NOW IS BEYOND MERE MORTALITY.
EVEN THE ANCIENT ONE NEVER DARED TO REWRITE THE PRINCIPLES OF EARTH MAGICK ITSELF -- BUT MY CHOICE IS CLEAR --
You SAY you face... mortality... but... who would you MISS?
Who would miss YOU, Stephen Strange?
You love no FAMILY -- like the LILIN whom Sister Nil STILL holds in her heart!
What is the difference... between being ALONE... and being DEAD?
STEPHEN STRANGE TAKES A DEEP BREATH -- WHEN HE ASKED HIS SERVANT TO RECORD HIS LAB NOTES, HE NEVER INTENDED TO CONFRONT HIS OWN FEELINGS!
STILL, HER WORDS HIT HOME. WHATEVER CHILDREN OF LILITH STRANGE COULD NOT DESTROY, HE BANISHED PERMANENTLY.
THANKS TO HIM, SISTER NIL -- WHOSE KISS MEANS A WITHERING DEATH -- IS THE LAST OF HER KIND.
A VERY LONELY, IF LETHAL, ORPHAN.
HER YEARNING TO FILL THE EMPTINESS I THRUST HER INTO SO SUDDENLY -- IT BRINGS ME PAINFUL REMEMBRANCE OF MY OWN ISOLATION...
...AND THAT OF... ANOTHER... DESPERATELY SEARCHING FOR "FAMILY TIES"...

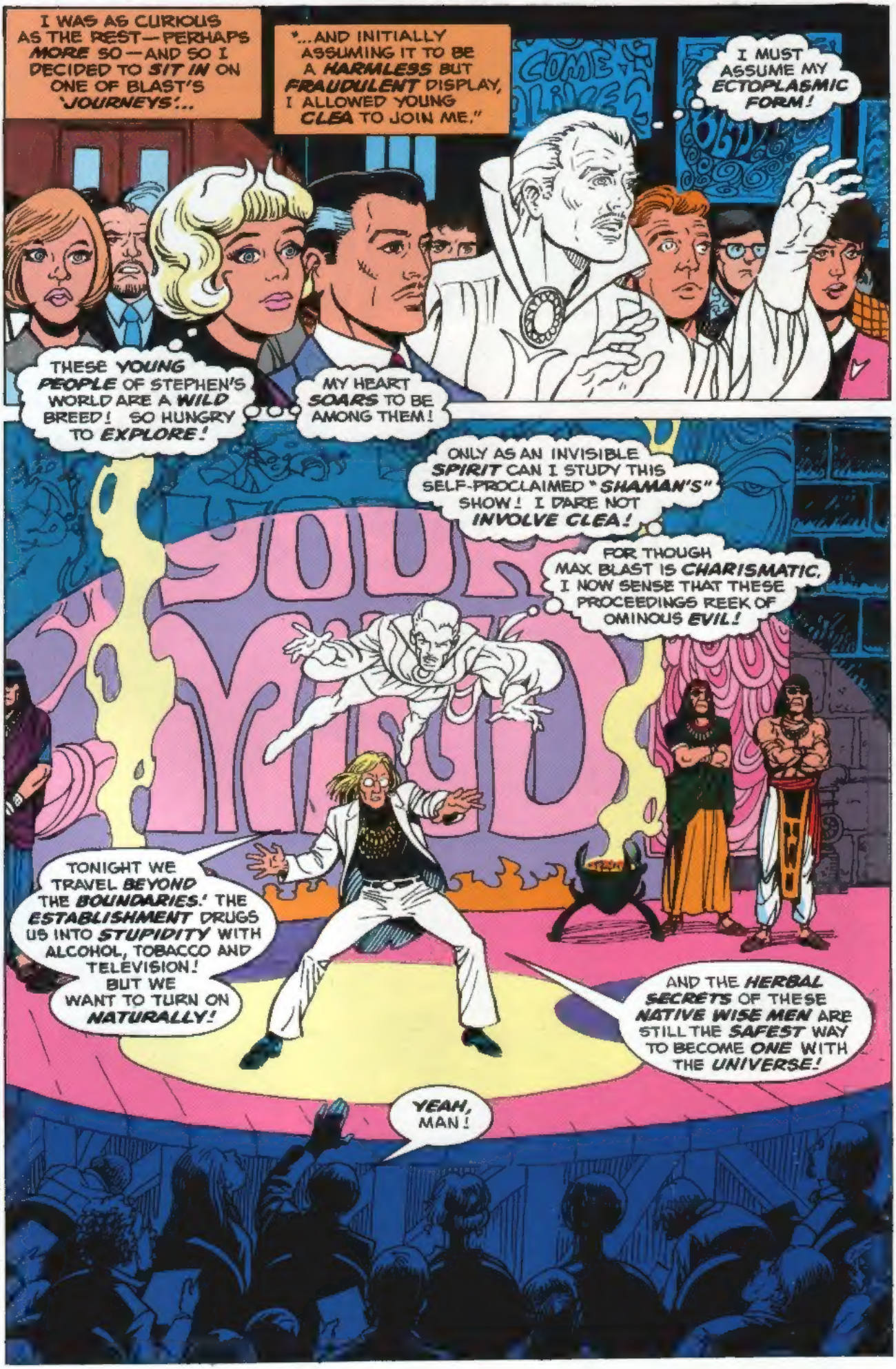
YEARS AGO, NIL, I INVOKED THE MONTESI FORMULA, RIDDING EARTH OF ITS VAMPIRIC INFESTATION.
NOW VARNAE, THEIR SELF-PROCLAIMED ORIGINAL LORD, HAS RETURNED! HE PLAGUES MY "FAMILY" FOR EXECUTING HIS...*
...ATTEMPTING TO JUSTIFY THE VIOLENCE HE PERPETUATES--WHEN ALL HE REALLY DESIRES IS TO END HIS OWN SOLITUDE!
* VARNAE JUMPED JOHN BLAZE AND BLADE AND COMPANY IN SPIRITS OF VENGEANCE #19 AND NIGHT-STALKERS #18 --EVAN
Stephen--MUST Sister Nil commit this "DESIRE" to memory?
And...you still didn't ANSWER... WHO would miss YOU?
AFTER SISTER NIL KILLED IMEI, I CAPTURED HER, TO KEEP ME MINDFUL OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF MY MISTAKES!
NOW I CATCH MYSELF SPEAKING TO HER LIKE A COMPANION! BY ETERNITY, HAVE I BEEN ALONE TOO LONG?
PERHAPS, NIL, I COULD ANSWER BOTH OF YOUR QUESTIONS IF WE COULD TURN BACK TIME'S INDOMITABLE HAND...

"...TO RE-VISIT A STRANGE TALE THAT BEGINS WITH A PERFORMANCE LOFT 'HAPPENING'...
"...NEAR MY FORMER GREENWICH VILLAGE HOME!"
TONIGHT... MAX-BLAST COME EXPLORE...
MAX BLAST
CHAPTER ONE:
"TO SEEK THE SHAMAN'S SECRET


...REAL INCENSE, BABY, CAN YOU SMELL IT? WHEN IT COMES TO THE WAYS OF THE SPIRIT WORLD, THIS MAX BLAST IS HEAVY!
YEAH— WHAT A TRIP!
"AS 'MASTER OF BLACK MAGICK', I WALKED AMONG MY FELLOW MEN IN THOSE DAYS—
"—AND IT SEEMED EVERYONE WAS SUDDENLY 'TURNING ON' TO 'ALTERNATIVE WISDOM'! HOW INNOCENT IT ALL SEEMED!

"I SAY 'SEEMED'!"
EXPAND
YOUR MIND
TRUE BELIEVERS!


I COME NOT AS YOUR TEACHER... IN THIS ERA OF ENLIGHTENMENT, WE ARE ALL SHAMEN!
I AM, RATHER, YOUR HUMBLE TOUR GUIDE! WE BEGIN A JOURNEY, PILGRIMS! ALL ABOARD!

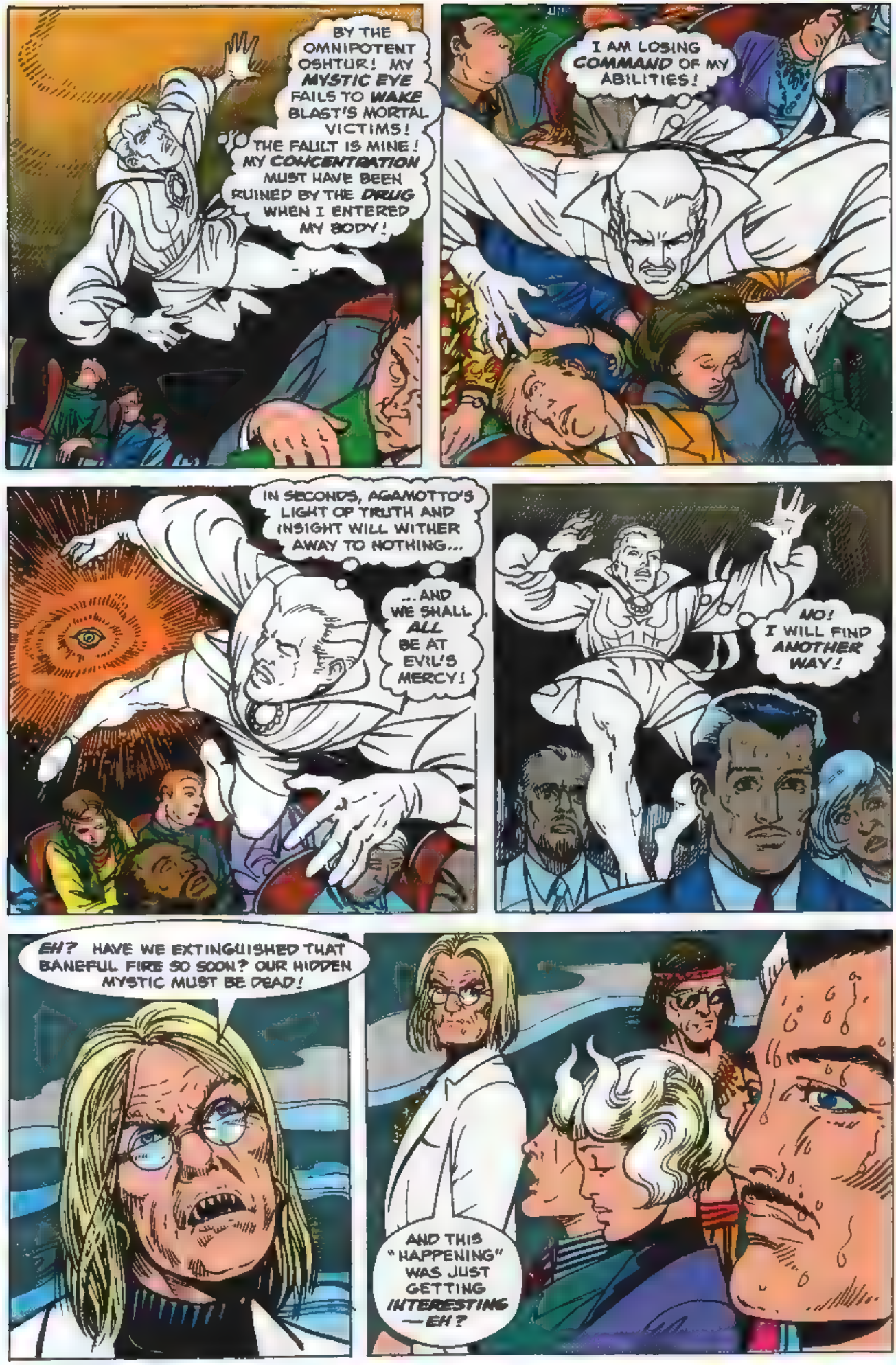

I WAS AS CURIOUS AS THE REST—PERHAPS MORE SO—AND SO I DECIDED TO SIT IN ON ONE OF BLAST'S 'JOURNEYS'...
"...AND INITIALLY ASSUMING IT TO BE A HARMLESS BUT FRAUDULENT DISPLAY, I ALLOWED YOUNG CLEA TO JOIN ME."
I MUST ASSUME MY ECTOPLASMIC FORM!
THESE YOUNG PEOPLE OF STEPHEN'S WORLD ARE A WILD BREED! SO HUNGRY TO EXPLORE!
MY HEART SOARS TO BE AMONG THEM!
ONLY AS AN INVISIBLE SPIRIT CAN I STUDY THIS SELF-PROCLAIMED "SHAMAN'S" SHOW! I DARE NOT INVOLVE CLEA!
FOR THOUGH MAX BLAST IS CHARISMATIC, I NOW SENSE THAT THESE PROCEEDINGS REEK OF OMINOUS EVIL!
TONIGHT WE TRAVEL BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES.' THE ESTABLISHMENT DRUGS US INTO STUPIDITY WITH ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND TELEVISION! BUT WE WANT TO TURN ON NATURALLY!
AND THE HERBAL SECRETS OF THESE NATIVE WISE MEN ARE STILL THE SAFEST WAY TO BECOME ONE WITH THE UNIVERSE!
YEAH, MAN!

HMM... ORGANIC HALLUCINOGENS, SOLD AS SPIRITUAL GROWTH?
WHEN MY SURGEON'S CAREER WAS IN SHAMBLES, I TOO MIGHT HAVE BEEN SEDUCED BY SUCH A PIPE DREAM!
YOU ARE READY TO TAKE THE FIRST STEPS, DAUNTLESS ONES, AND MAX BLAST HAS WHAT YOU NEED!
"I'M EMBARRASSED AT HOW EASILY I WAS CONFUSED, THEN...
"...AT FIRST, BLAST'S 'PRESCRIPTION' SEEMED MERE MORONIC BABBLE! MORE SHAM THAN SHAMAN!
FAR OWWWT...
"AND YET THE AUDIENCE'S IMMEDIATE REACTION WAS UNMISTAKABLE!
"MY MIND BUZZED IN APPREHENSION— HERE WAS AN UNSEEN SCOURGE AS SINISTER AS MY ARCH-FOE, BARON MORDO! BUT WHAT?
"THUS, I REJOINED MY CORPOREAL SELF, AMIDST THE AGITATED CROWD, STILL BLIND TO THE TRUTH!"
AND, ALTHOUGH YOU KNOW IT NOT, YOU HAVE WHAT MAX BLAST NEEDS, TOO!
PINCERS OF PARALYSIS!
I HAVE BEEN SEDATED— POISONED! I CAN'T MOVE!
WHAT A HORROR! THANK THE VISHANTI, MY ECTOPLASMIC FORM IS UNTAINTED!

CURSE ME FOR A NOVICE!
WHILE I SPIED ON THIS CHARLATAN, HE MUST HAVE DRUGGED US ALL! BUT HOW?
YES, DAUNTLESS ONES, YOUR LITTLE LIVES CAN ACQUIRE MEANING! HAHAHAHA!
"THE 'WEAPON,' UNFORTUNATELY, WAS IN MY HAND THE WHOLE TIME! THE PAPER PROGRAM!
MAX BLAST
"WE HAD ABSORBED THE POWERFUL ESSENCE OF A PSYCHEDELIC PLANT THROUGH OUR VERY SKIN!"
BY HOGGOTH! A LECTURE ON "ALTERED STATES" IS NO CRIME— BUT TO DOSE US WITHOUT CONSENT IS PSYCHIC RAPE!
DOCTOR STRANGE WILL TOLERATE NO MORE!
AS THE EYE OF AGAMOTTO, PIERCES NIGHTMARE'S DUSKY SHADE,
HELP US NOW RECLAIM OUR SENSES, LET THIS STAIN OF DARKNESS FADE!
"I DID NOT NEED A BODY TO SUMMON THE BURNING LIGHT OF TRUTH...
"... THE ALL-SEEING EYE OF AGAMOTTO!
WHAT? WHO FILLS THE ROOM WITH THAT HORRID, SICKENING GLARE?
WHO CAN RESIST MY DRUG, UNSEEN BY ME?

I SENSE OCCULT INTERFERENCE— WE MAY HAVE TO STRUGGLE FOR THE SUSTENANCE THAT SHOULD BE OURS FOR THE TAKING!
HARVEST THEM ALL!
OUR INVISIBLE TRICKSTER MUST BE AMONG THE VULGAR HERD!
AND MY INSTINCT TELLS ME, BROTHERS, HIS BLOOD FLOWS AS CRIMSON AS ANYONE ELSE'S!
HOGGOTH! HIS TEETH!

"IN A MOMENT, I ACCEPTED WHAT I HAD FELT ALL ALONG, BUT COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO IDENTIFY...
"...FEELING AS BEATEN AS THE DAY I LEARNED MY SHREDDED NERVES WOULD NEVER AGAIN MANIPULATE A SCALPEL!
"THE TEETH WERE THE NEEDLE-SHARP CANINES OF A VAMPIRE!"
YES, YESSSSS...
DELICIOUS CRIMSON CRIMSON...
BY THE TWELVE MOONS OF MUNNIPOR! I'D HOPED THESE KINDS OF PARASITES WERE JUST SUPERSTITION— BUT I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER!
EMPTY THEM ALL, SWIFTLY, AND WE SHALL LEAVE THIS ACCURSED MYSTIC GLOW FAR BEHIND US!
THIS BIZARRE "SHAMAN'S" GUISE IS JUST A GAME—TO SECURE A SPICIER FOOD!
THEY INTEND TO GORGE THEMSELVES WITH DRUGGED BLOOD!
WELL, THAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN, DEPRAVED ONES!


BY THE OMNIPOTENT OSHTUR! MY MYSTIC EYE FAILS TO WAKE BLAST'S MORTAL VICTIMS!
THE FAULT IS MINE! MY CONCENTRATION MUST HAVE BEEN RUINED BY THE DRUG WHEN I ENTERED MY BODY!
I AM LOSING COMMAND OF MY ABILITIES!
IN SECONDS, AGAMOTTO'S LIGHT OF TRUTH AND INSIGHT WILL WITHER AWAY TO NOTHING...
...AND WE SHALL ALL BE AT EVIL'S MERCY!
NO! I WILL FIND ANOTHER WAY!
EH? HAVE WE EXTINGUISHED THAT BANEFUL FIRE SO SOON? OUR HIDDEN MYSTIC MUST BE DEAD!
AND THIS "HAPPENING" WAS JUST GETTING INTERESTING —EH?

AHHH... I HAD NOT PLANNED A TASTING TONIGHT, BUT I CAN ALWAYS IMPROVISE!
NO! WITH ALL THE ESOTERIC SKILLS I HAVE STUDIED, I CANNOT LIFT A FINGER!
THE DRUG IMMOBILIZES ME!
MASTER—WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU SAID WE HAD TO HURRY!
SILENCE! NOTHING CAN STOP US NOW!
HOW DARE YOU INTERRUPT THE CHOSEN SUCCESSOR TO LORD VARNAE WHEN HE WOULD SAVOR SUCH A DELICACY!
"HOW LONG, HOW BRUTAL THOSE FEW SECONDS WERE! I POSSESSED WHAT I NEEDED TO BREAK FREE, BUT DID I KNOW IT?"
MUST I WATCH AS HIS NEEDLE TEETH PENETRATE CLEA'S THROAT? ANCIENT ONE! IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, PLEASE HELP!
"BUT, OF COURSE, MY VENERABLE MENTOR DID NOT ANSWER. WHY SHOULD HE HAVE?
"THE MAGICK REQUIRED TO SCORCH AWAY MY PARALYSIS WAS NOT FOUND IN ANY BOOK OR SCROLL...
YOU ARE MINE, CHILD...
"...BUT IN MY HEART!"
TAKE YOUR VILE HANDS FROM HER!

MORE THAN LUBNA'S LUMINESCENCE,
OR CRIMSON CYTTORAK'S DISPLAY,
THE SPARK WITHIN A RIGHTEOUS HEART,
WILL BURN THESE PARASITES AWAY!
WHAT HAVE WE HERE? A COLORFUL LITTLE SORCERER?
BAH! I WAS SLAUGHTERING YOUR ILK BEFORE MAN TROD UPON THIS CONTINENT!
YOU ARE ALONE, FOOL! WE ARE MANY!
PERHAPS YOU DID NOT HEAR ME—
LET HER GO!
"AT FIRST I ONLY SURPRISED HIM WITH MY AUDACITY..."
HSSSSST!

"...BUT HAVING SEIZED THE ADVANTAGE, I WHIRLED ABOUT AND MADE SCREAMING ASHES OUT OF THE MASTER'S THREE VAMPIRIC SLAVES!"
HAHAHA! VERY DEFT, MAGE! I SEE I AM CONFRONTED BY A PEER! ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF!
VERDELET, RIGHTFUL HEIR TO THE LORD OF VAMPIRES, VARNAE!
YOU HAVE DESTROYED MY REVENANTS!
NO MATTER...THEY ARE EASY TO COME BY WHEREVER MEN LET OTHERS MAKE THEIR CHOICES FOR THEM!
I SEE YOU EVE THE WENCH! YOU MUST INTEND TO MAKE USE OF HER YOURSELF! I SHALL GIVE HER TO YOU!
IN FACT, I WILL SET ALL THESE CHILDREN FREE—BUT NOT AS A GIFT, HOWEVER—AS MY SIDE OF A COVENANT!
CAN YOU DOUBT MY MOTIVES? MY LIFE IS SO RELENTLESSLY BORING, ALWAYS DEVISING SCHEMES TO ENTERTAIN MYSELF—AND PROCURE FOOD! BUT, HOW CHALLENGING THE GAME WOULD BECOME IF ONE SUCH AS YOU WERE TO JOIN ME... ...AS A VAMPIRE BROTHER!

"I WAS JOLTED TO HEAR THE WAY HE TALKED ABOUT CLEA AND ME...
"...AND EVEN MORE SHOCKED TO SEE THE CHAOS THAT RESULTED AS VERDELET'S DRUG WORE OFF!"
NAHNA-NAHNAH-GONNA-GETME!
NO! IT'S A DREAM! IT'S A TRICK!
AW, MAN, IT'S ALL SO INSANE!
"THE AUDIENCE'S ABRUPT RE-ENTRY INTO HARSH REALITY WAS TOO MUCH FOR THEM!"
IT'S A SMALL MAN WHO PREYS ON THE INNOCENT, VERDELET! I HAVE NEVER HEARD OF THE "VARNAE" YOU CLAIM A KINDRED WITH...
...BUT I SUSPECT HE WOULD BE ASHAMED TO HEAR ONE SO EMPTY INVOKE HIS NAME...
WHAT? YOU DARE!
NO!
...ONE WHO CANNOT BEAR THE ALL-SEEING EYE'S LIGHT OF TRUTH!
AIEEEE!
ONE WITH A VOID WHERE HIS SOUL SHOULD BE — A BLACK HOLE OF LONELINESS AND DIRE INADEQUACY!
THUS SPEAKS DOCTOR STRANGE!

RRR... NO ONE... MUST SEE ME... LIKE THIS! BUT HEED MY WARNING, DOCTOR STRANGE...
...I WILL REMEMBERRR...
"WITH THAT, VERDELET BECAME NOTHING MORE THAN A MIST...
"... AND THEN, THE COWARD WAS GONE!"
IT IS DONE.
NO, IT ISN'T—THE CROWD, STEPHEN! YOU MUST RELEASE THESE INEXPERIENCED TRAVELERS!
I WANT TO SEE EVERYTHING— BUT THESE POOR PEOPLE ARE NOT READY TO LIVE WITH THIS NIGHTMARE!
HMM... YOU'RE QUITE RIGHT, CLEA! A MYSTIC VEIL OVER THEIR COLLECTIVE MEMORY SHALL SPARE THEM!
LET IT BE SO...
"...NOW!"
AW, NO, DID I FALL ASLEEP AGAIN?
I SWEAR, AS LONG AS I LIVE, I'LL NEVER GET METHOD ACTING!
WHO'S THAT GIRL WITH THE CRAZY HAIRDO?
OH, GOSH— I FORGOT TO LOCK MY APARTMENT DOOR!

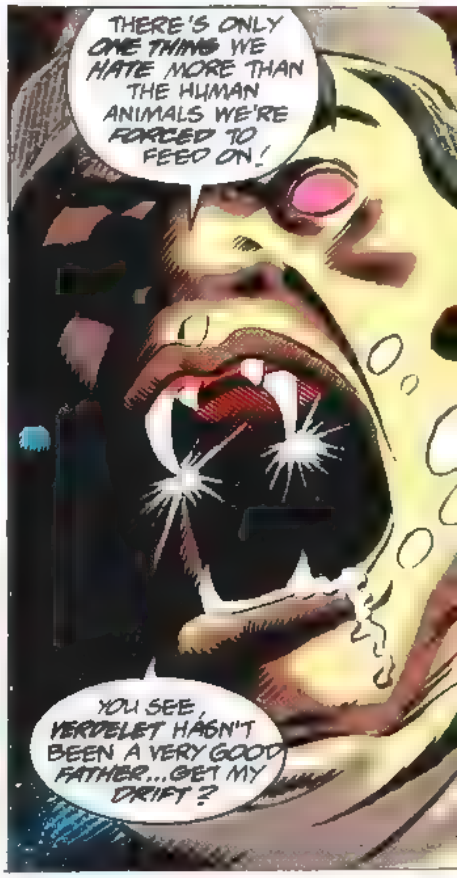
"MINUTES LATER, AS CLEA AND I CAREFULLY OVERSAW THE EXIT OF THE VICTIMS..."
YES, BUT IT IS NOT MEANT FOR MORTALS TO KNOW ALL THAT TRANSPIRES IN THE SUPERNATURAL REALM, CLEA —THAT IS WHY I AM HERE!
I HOPE THEY WILL NOT ABANDON THEIR ENTHUSIASM FOR METAPHYSICAL GROWTH, STEPHEN!
MY SPELL OF FORGETFULNESS WILL LEAVE THEM WITH NOTHING BUT A MILD DISTASTE FOR MOB SCENES ...AND FOR SO-CALLED HEALERS WHO PROPOSE THAT "KNOWING YOURSELF" CAN COME IN A DRUG!
ONCE IS ENOUGH, BABY!
EXIT
LET'S GO TO THE OLIVE TREE, SEYMOUR, I'M STARVIN' FOR SOME REASON!
'COURSE I DUG IT, BABE— BY THE WAY, WHAT'S YOUR SIGN? DON'T TELL ME— SCORPIO!
I ASK YA, WHATEVER HAPPENED TA REAL THEATER, LIKE FIDDLER ONNA ROOF?
WELL, I FEEL MORE ALIVE WITH EVERY CHALLENGE WE FACE, STEPHEN! I CAN SEE THERE IS SO MUCH TO LEARN... AT YOUR SIDE!
WHY DID I EVER SEEK TO SHIELD CLEA FROM THE PERILOUS UNKNOWN? THIS IS THE LIFE SHE WAS BORN FOR!
SHE SHOULD BE AT MY SIDE, AS... AN APPRENTICE! BUT I MUST HIDE SUCH HOPES —THE CHOICE SHALL BE HERS ALONE!
"Stop, STOP, Please tell SISTER NIL..."

who is .. CLEA ?
STEPHEN ! Who is ... CLEA ? You speak of her .. DIFFERENTLY than the others ..
A FORMER STUDENT.
NO. FORMER ISN'T THE RIGHT WORD. A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP IS FOR LIFE ...
It meant SO MUCH for you to be JOINED with her instead of joining Verdelet !
But HE was more POWERFUL ! I DON'T understand !
NOR DO I UNDERSTAND, SISTER NIL -- WHO WAS I IN THOSE DAYS WHEN CLEA AND I WERE INSEPARABLE ?
WHY DID I NEED TO PLAY THE MANIAC ?

"WERE CLEA AND I NAIVE TO PRESUME WE COULD BEAT EVERY BANEFUL SODDARGE BACK TO THE SHADOWS BY EXPOSING THEM TO OUR LIGHT?
"FOR EVERY LURKING FEAR WE BANISHED, IT BEGAN TO SEEM AS IF TWO MORE WOULD RAISE THEIR HOWLING HEADS!
"SPIDER-MAN BROUGHT ONE OF THIS NEW NIGHT BREED TO OUR ATTENTION, A BLOOD-SEEKING PREDATOR OF PURELY SCIENTIFIC ORIGIN--MICHAEL MORBIUS!"
HSSSSST! STAY BACK! I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU ARE STALKING MORBIUS...
...BUT YOU'D BETTER BE PREPARED TO PAY FOR YOUR FOLLY WITH YOUR STEAMING BLOOD!
CHAPTER TWO:
NIGHT OF THE BLOODPACK

OOOOH, LISTEN TO THE MAN GET DOWN! SURE, WE COULD DANCE THE SNOW RED, MORBIUS...
...OR WE COULD HELP EACH OTHER. WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?
YOUR COURAGE INTRIGUES ME.
ME AN' MY PEOPLE, WE WANNA RECRUIT YOU, "LIVING VAMPIRE", IN OUR WAR AGAINST THE EVIL ONE!

UNDER THE FIRST HUNTER'S MOON OF WINTER, MANY EVILS PREY ON 125TH STREET!
THIS ONE CREATES VAMPIRES WHO AIN'T LIVING AND THEY AIN'T DEAD, NEITHER, JUST MISERABLE, SICK BLOOD JUNKIES!
AND YOU RISK YOUR LIVES TO ENROLL MORE--
OH, MAN, LIKE WE GOT LIVES TO RISK! TELL 'IM, SELENA!


THERE'S ONLY ONE THING WE HATE MORE THAN THE HUMAN ANIMALS WE'RE FORCED TO FEED ON!
YOU SEE, VERDELET HASN'T BEEN A VERY GOOD FATHER...GET MY DRIFT?

"THE ONE THEY CALLED MORBIUS SMILED ENIGMATICALLY...
"...AS IF BEING RUN TO GROUND BY THE BLOODPACK--OR CONFIRMATION THAT VERDELET WAS THEIR DARK PROGENITOR--WAS WHAT HE HAD BEEN AFTER ALL NIGHT!
"NO HANDSHAKE WAS OFFERED, BUT SELENA AND HER PACK UNDERSTOOD!"
LET'S GO GET HIM, THEN.
BUT IF ONE DROP OF INNOCENT BLOOD IS SHED WHILE YOU BATTLE BESIDE MORBIUS, YOU SHALL REGRET--
"BUT THE THREAT DIED WHILE STILL IN THE THROAT...
"...AS A PROJECTILE IMPALED SELENA THROUGH HER HEART..
"...A DARK WOODEN BLADE OF HAND-SHARPENED TEAK!"
CRUD! WHO THREW THE KNIFE, OLD MAN?
I DON'T KNOW! NO ONE WAS THERE!

YO, "NO ONE'S" GOT A NAME, GRANDPA!
DON'T TELL ME THE REP OF BLADE, VAMPIRE STALKER...
...HASN'T MADE IT DOWN HERE IN HARLEM--YOU'LL HURT MY FEELINGS!
DON'T MESS WITH THE BLOOD-PACK, BROTHER!
I'M NO "BROTHER" TO BLOODSUCKERS! DO YOU LIKE YOUR STAKE WELL DONE?
FWAK!
"NO DOUBT BLADE WONDERED WHY THE SLAIN VAMPIRE LAY UNCHANGING IN THE ROOF-TOP'S THICK BLANKET OF SNOW.
"NO ASHES, NO MIST.
"SELENA HAD SAID SHE WAS JUST A 'BLOOD JUNKIE'..."

"... AND SEEING HIS PREY FOR WHAT THEY WERE -- PRIOR VICTIMS OF VERDELET'S PLAGUE OF EVIL -- BLADE LOST HIS LETHAL MOMENTUM!"
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE HALF A LIFE? WE CAN'T STAND THE DAYLIGHT, BUT WE AIN'T TRUE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT, NEITHER!
AND WE WON'T STAND FOR NO JIVE-TALKING FOOL INTERFERIN' WITH OUR REVENGE! LEAVE HIM BE, PEOPLE -- SAVE IT FOR VERDELET!
UNHH!
"BUT, AS THE WOMAN'S IMPASSIONED WORDS CONDEMNED THE BLOOD-PACK'S 'FATHER'...
"... THE ONE KNOWN AS "THE OLD MAN" LUNGED MORE VICIOUSLY THAN EVER BEFORE, HISSING!
TRAITOR!
"TOO LATE, SHE REALIZED BLADE HAD EXAGGERATED HIS FALL TO CAPTURE THE ADVANTAGE...
"... BRUTAL ADVANTAGE!"
LOOK OUT, OLD-- AAAIGH!

"JIVE-TALKING FOOL?" PUH-LEASE!
MJSSST!
GOOD SHOW, BLADE-- I WAS LOATH TO REVEAL MYSELF TILL CERTAIN I COULD ROUT THIS LITTLE CABAL!
YOU MUST ADMIT, ALLOWING MY HAGGARD CHILDREN TO IMAGINE THEMSELVES REBELS...
...WAS AN EXQUISITE WAY FOR THEIR MASTER TO WHIP THEM BACK INTO LINE!
YOUR UNEXPECTED BLUNDERING, HOWEVER, SLIT THE THROAT OF THE DIRTY BEAST FOR ME... HAHAHA!
SO PLEASE, SATISFY AN "OLD MAN'S" CURIOSITY-- IS BLADE YOUR GIVEN NAME, OR YOUR SURNAME? HOW SHALL I ADDRESS YOU IN POLITE SOCIETY?
YOU MAY CALL ME... LORD VERDELET!
WHAT? THE EVIL ONE, AMONG US THE WHOLE TIME?

RAARGH!
NOTHING MORE AWESOME THAN THE TRUTH, eh?
HA HA HA HA!
YOU WON'T BE LAUGHING FOR LONG, YOU SMUG SICKO!
"DEATH'S DAGGER SANG TOWARD VERDELET, WHO WAS, BY NOW, WRESTLING WITH THE LAST REBEL VAMPIRE...
"...BUT EVEN BLADE'S AIM FAILED TO PENETRATE A TARGET THAT COULD WILL ITSELF A NEW SHAPE!"
YOU'RE NO ONE'S MASTER! YOU'RE A DISEASE... UHNNH!
A DISEASE, MY SON... OR A CURE?

I OFFERED YOU SO MUCH!
VERDELET WITH HIS MUTABLE FORM...
"...COULD ALWAYS GROW STRONGER TEETH THAN HIS REVENANTS!"
FOOLS! HAD YOU PROVEN UNDYING COMMITMENT TO YOUR LORD, I WOULD NOT BAR YOUR EVOLUTION, BUT BESTOWEATH YOU THE GIFTS OF A VAMPIRE PROPER!
BETRAYAL DESERVES BARREN DEATH, NO MORE--AND THIS HUMAN WILL JOIN YOU!
"THE 'HUMAN' EYED HIS NEXT SHOT...
"...TAKING A SPLIT-SECOND TO REGISTER THAT HE--AND VERDELET--HADN'T KEPT TRACK OF ALL THE PLAYERS ON THE KILLING FIELD!
"WHERE WAS MORBIUS? COULD HE TURN INVISIBLE?
"SUDDENLY..."
BLADE! TRUST ME, I CAN EXPLAIN EVERYTHING LATER! WE BOTH WANT THIS VERMIN...
...LET'S TAKE HIM TOGETHER!
TRUST YOU?
YOU CRAWL UP MY SKIVVIES AND I'M SUPPOSED TO TRUST YOU? OVER MY DEAD BOD--

UHHH!
"VERDELET'S LAST REVENANT MADE A CRUDE BUT EFFECTIVE WEAPON!"
YOU TWO...
...MIGHT HAVE MADE A FORMIDABLE TEAM...ANOTHER NIGHT!
...AS MY STAKES SILENCE BOTH YOUR HEART-BEATS, THE IMMORTAL SOUL OF DESPISED VARNAE WILL WRITHE IN AGONY!
EVERY DEATH WILL COMPOUND VARNAE'S TORMENT--FOR HE YIELDED HIS LIFE FORCE TO DRACULA... WHO SQUANDERED IT AND LIES IN ASHES!
HEAR ME, VARNAE--LORD VERDELET MOCKS YOU AND YOUR "CHOSEN ONE!"
BUT, ALAS...
'BUT LOST IN HIS PATHOLOGICAL RAVINGS, VERDELET FAILED TO NOTICE THE AMBER GLOW IN THE SNOW AROUND HIM...

"...HERALDING THE ENTRANCE OF A MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS!"
PARDON THE PARAPHRASE, BUT THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, "LORD OF THE VAMPIRES," THAN ARE DREAMT OF IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY...
...AMONG THEM, AGAMOTTO'S ILLUMINATING LIGHT! AWAKEN!
"LIKE VERDELET, I HAD ORIGINALLY PLANNED TO CLOAK MYSELF...
"...BUT NOW I JUDGED THAT THIS VAMPIRE PLAGUE COULD NOT BURN ITSELF OUT WITHOUT DIRECT INTERVENTION!
STRANGE! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!
AHHH! MY MIND IS MY OWN AGAIN!
WHAT'S HAPPENING?
I UNDERSTAND WHY I NEED TO ENSCONCE MYSELF IN THE SHADOWS, SORCERER...
...FOR I AM A THING OF DARKNESS, OF EVIL!
PRAY, WHAT DOES THAT MAKE YOU, hmmm?

THANKS FOR THE WAKE-UP CALL, BLINKY-- BUT JUDGING BY THAT CAPE AN' THE DRACULA STACHE...
...I'D SAY YOU'RE GONNA BE NEXT ON MY HIT LIST!
BLADE NO!
LET AGAMOTTO'S PERFECT LIGHT--
COMPEL THESE DARKLINGS TO UNITE!
YES, STRANGE! THIS IS THE GLORY...
...WE WERE BORN FOR!

MY ENCHANTMENT SENT BLADE AND MORBIUS SCREAMING DOWN UPON VERDELET, BUT HE DEFIED US STILL, INSANELY WELCOMING THEIR ASSAULT!
COME! YOUR DEATHS SHALL BE THE STUFF OF LEGEND!
YOU HAVE THE BLOOD WORD OF THE ONE TRUE LORD OF VAMPIRES!
"TRUE LORD?" YOU MAY HAVE SHOWN THAT YOU CAN INFECT YOUR CHILDREN WITH BLOODLUST...
...AND THAT YOU CAN STEAL THE ADDICT'S UN-LIFE YOUR VAMPIRE'S ICHOR INSTILLS IN THEM...
...BUT "LORD?" NEVER! LEADERS ATTAIN THEIR PLACE BY INITIATIVE, NOT DECEIT!
"VERDELET, HOWEVER, IGNORED MY PROVOCATIONS...
"...FOR SAVAGE COMBAT WAS THE ONLY RAPPORT HE COULD STILL FEEL!

"... BLADE'S WILL RESISTED MY PERSUASION, PERCEIVING IT NO DOUBT, AS DOMINATION!
"IT SEEMED I COULD MOVE MY 'CHESS MEN' TO PERFORM, BUT NOT AT THEIR PEAK! MOREOVER, WHAT VERDELET PERCEIVED AS MY STRATEGY--TO HELP HIS NATURAL ENEMIES RUIN HIM--WAS RAPIDLY UNRAVELLING!"
DEAR DOCTOR, YOU ARE, LIKE MYSELF, A LOVER OF GAMES--BUT THIS FARCE ISN'T WORTHY OF EITHER OF US!
ALL YOUR MAGICK INFLUENCE, AND YOU TRIFLE WITH A PSEUDO-VAMPIRE AND THIS TIRESOME BLADESMAN?
RRRR
"THEN I NOTICED...
ARRGH!
WUNT
...OF EXPLOITATION AND DECEIT! HYPOCRITE!
AND YOU ACCUSE ME...

IF I SEVERED YOUR TENUOUS PUPPET STRINGS, THESE BRUTES WOULD JUST AS SOON KILL EACH OTHER!
TELL ME, SINCE YOU MENTIONED IT, WHAT KIND OF "LEADER" DOES THAT MAKE YOU?
HAHAHA!
"THE POMPOUS CREATURE HAD A POINT, I SUPPOSE...
"...BUT PREJUDICE HAD BLINDED HIM TO ALL THE CLUES WHEN IT CAME TO MY 'PSEUDO-VAMPIRE!'
"FOR AT THAT MOMENT, AGAINST MY ORDERS, 'MORBIUS' BOUNCED BACK FROM YERDELET'S LAST BLOW UNSCATHED.. AS CLEA!"

MY DISCIPLE...
...YOU REVEAL YOURSELF, DESPITE OUR AGREED STRATEGY!
STEPHEN... YOU DO NOT FIGHT ALONE...
...SO WHY PRETEND YOU DO?
CLEA? A MOST EXQUISITE SURPRISE!
YOU HAVE BLOSSOMED INTO SUCH A WOMAN, MY DEAR!
YOU CAN SEE, SURELY-- VERDELET IS THE VICTIM HERE!
I SEE... AND WE'RE TO BELIEVE YOU MADE THOSE MONSTERS OUT OF YOUR WARPED SENSE OF "FAMILY"?
I SEEK MORTALS TO JOIN ME, YES-- BUT NOT EVERY-ONE IS WORTHY OF THE ETERNAL LIFE I CAN GIVE...
...SOME BECOME MERE REVENANTS... NOT MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, BUT MERE SERVANTS...
...AND WHEN SERVANTS REBEL, MUST I NOT DEFEND MYSELF?

BUT YOU, CLEA... WOULDN'T YOU LIKE THE CHANCE TO TASTE THE FIERCE LIFE ONLY I CAN OFFER?
DO YOU REALLY THINK REPRESSED, ICY STEPHEN STRANGE WILL EVER FULFILL YOUR PASSION?
YES!
VERDELET, YOU SICK THING... YOU ONLY WANT WHAT YOU CAN'T HAVE!
SWAKK!

VERDELET SAW CLEA ONLY AS A PRIZE...AND NOT A WARRIOR!
"SHE HAD MISSED HIS HEART. HE WOULD NOT PERISH FROM THE WOUND. BUT EVEN AS HE SHIFTED SHAPE TO ESCAPE, SHE KNEW THE REAL DAMAGE SHE HAD DONE.
AHHH... I'LL TAKE THAT...
...AS AN INVITATION... TO BESEECH YOU... AGAIN!
YOU'RE APPARENTLY RUNNING THIS GAME NOW-- WHAT IS OUR NEXT MOVE?
I DO NEED TO LET BLADE GO FREE OF MY ENCHANTMENT SOMEDAY...
"FOR IF EVER BLADE HATED ME...
"...HE HATED ME THEN FOR THE MYSTIC HOLD THAT PREVENTED HIS EVEN SCRATCHING HIS NOSE!

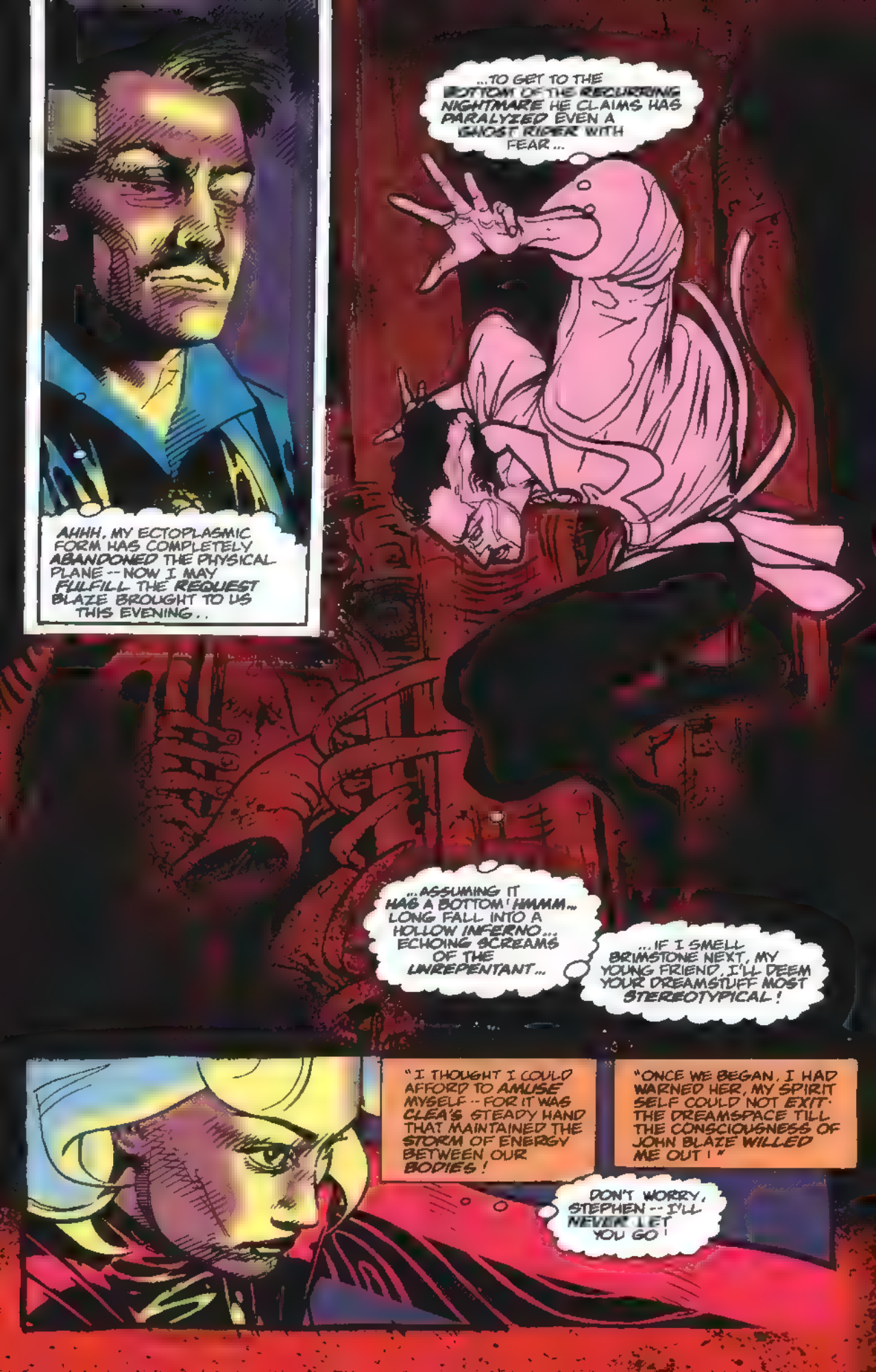
BUT CLEA, AS ALWAYS SURPRISED ME WITH HER INTERPRETATION OF THE WHOLE SITUATION!"
NOW STEPHEN, YOU KNOW YOU'RE ONLY SARCASTIC WHEN YOU'RE DEVILISHLY PLEASED WITH YOURSELF.
THE TEACHER ALLOWED HIS STUDENT TO REBEL... BUT DID SHE PASS THE TEST?
HAVE YOU HEARD THE SAYING...
"... WITH FLYING COLORS?"
" BLADE'S FIRST UTTERANCES UPON RELEASE WERE NOT SUITABLE FOR REPEATING, NIL...
YOU HAD HIM, AN' YOU LET THE HEAD HONCHO GET AWAY?
GOOD THING I'M OUTTA STAKES, OR A CERTAIN MAGICIAN JUS 'MIGHT EXPERIENCE A SHARP PAIN IN TH--!

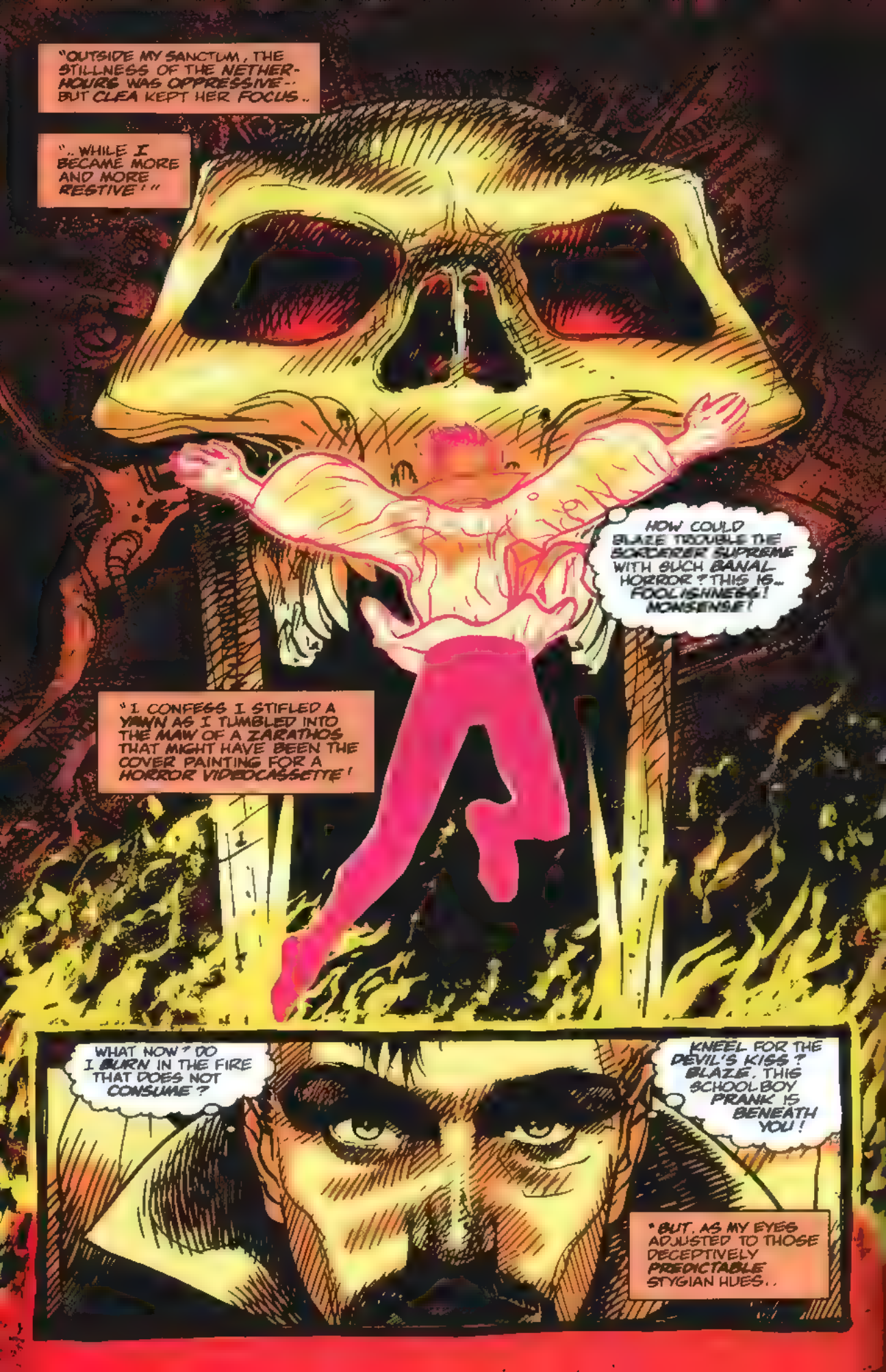
SURELY YOU REALIZE, MR. BLADE...
...MY REJECTION HUMBLED VERDELET MUCH MORE THAN YOUR BLADES COULD!
BUT TO EASE YOUR SLEEP THIS NIGHT, I'LL BORROW AN OLD TRICK OF THE MASTER'S... FORGET!
UHHH... OKAY!
HOW'D I GET UP HERE?
AN' WHO ARE YOU?

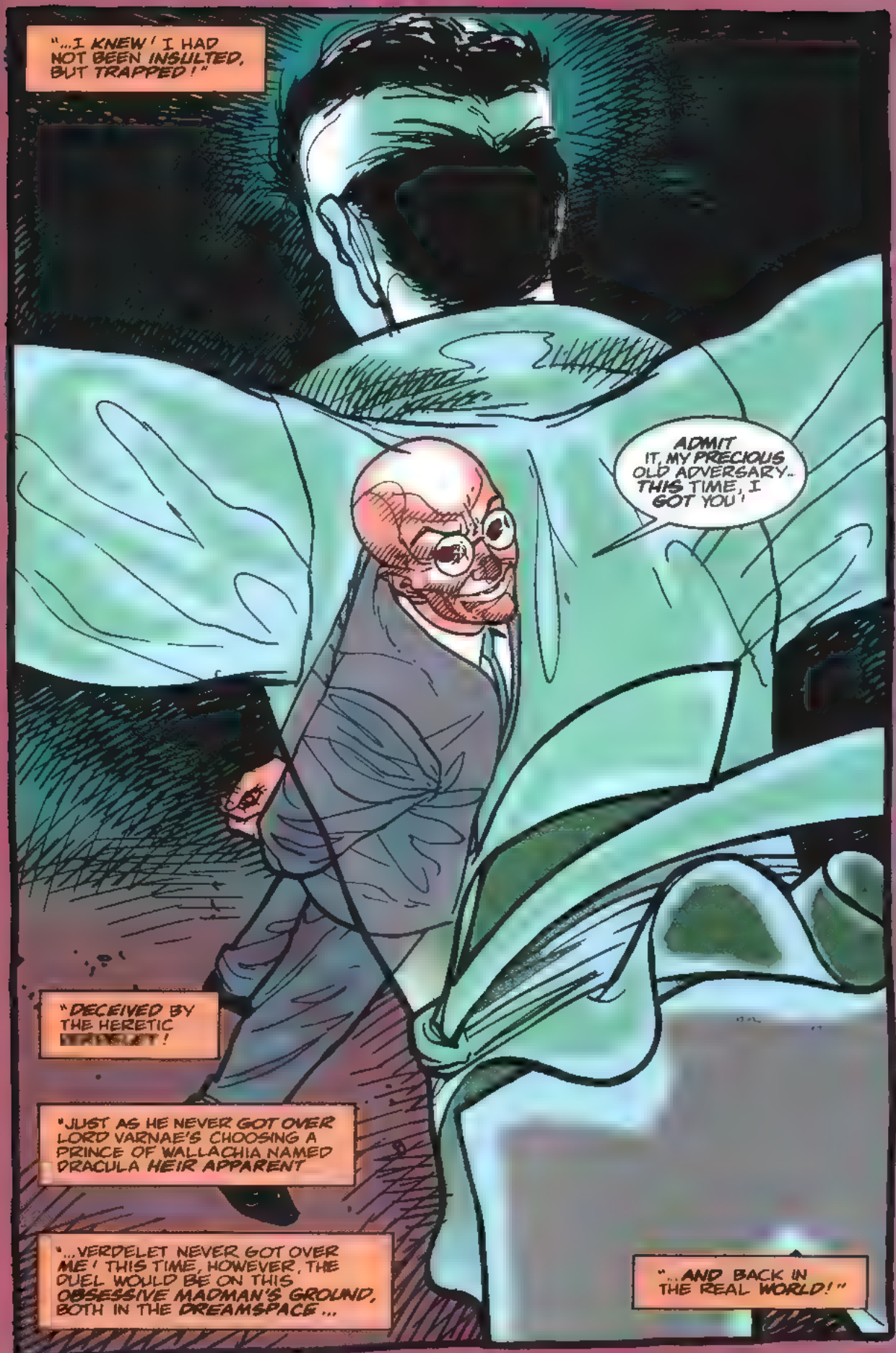
COME, MR. BLADE...
...LET US INVITE YOU DOWNTOWN FOR A HOT DRINK...
...AND, PERHAPS, A STORY!
BUT... WELL... I MEAN...
OKAY.
"I KNOW NOT WHETHER SHE BEGUILED HIM WITH MAGICK, OR WITH HER NATURAL CHARM AND INNATE PURITY.
"SOMETIMES EVEN A SORCERER CAN'T DISTINGUISH THE DIFFERENCE--OR HIDE HOW IMPRESSED HE IS WITH HIS DISCIPLE!"
I'M CLEA. AND THIS IS STEPHEN.
WOULDN'T YOU SAY IT'S A PERFECT NIGHT FOR A TAXI RIDE?
"NOT ONLY HAD CLEA PASSED MY TEST, BUT I SAW HOW I COULD LEARN FROM HER AS WELL."
"At last I understand your problem Stephen!"

DOCTOR STRANGE ABANDONS HIS NARRATIVE, RETURNING TO HIS STRUGGLE WITH ELEMENTAL FORCES -- BUT SISTER NIL IS HOOKED!
SISTER NIL knows what troubles your thoughts
It is not VARNAE, nor the recurring threat of the heretic VERDELET!
It is not even your OBSESSION with the SALOMES DANCE ENERGY you would EXPEL from yourself!
You NEED Clea! She is more than a STUDENT--more than a DISCIPLE!
ENOUGH... ABOUT... CLEA!
SHE'S GONE! LET ME BE!
NO. EXCUSE ME SINCE I ABSORBED SALOMES DANCE, I... SUCCUMB TOO EASILY TO RAGE
YOU ARE CORRECT. CLEA AND I HAVE SAVED EACH OTHER'S LIVES MORE TIMES THAN I CAN SAY.
SHE IS MY FRIEND. MY COMPANION. MY... LOVER.
BUT I DO NOT "NEED" HER
STRANGE WOULD BE ALARMED TO KNOW SISTER NIL'S SILENT REACTION...
Could...SISTER NIL... be your friend... companion...
...your LOVER, Stephen?

"I MAY NOT HAVE NEEDED HER, BUT IN OUR FINAL SEASON IN THAT DRAFTY OLD PLACE ON BLEEKER STREET.
"...MY DISCIPLE'S DISPOSITION DID FREE ME TO VENTURE FURTHER AND FURTHER INTO THE UNKNOWN --SHE BECAME MY ANCHOR TO REALITY!"
LONG HAVE I BEEN FASCINATED BY THE CONTRADICTIONS EMBODIED IN JOHN BLAZE..
...NOW, THE ATLANTEAN DREAMWAVE, PERILOUS WITH ANY SUBJECT..
...THRUSTS ME INTO THE DREAMSPACE SHARED BY BLAZE AND HIS HELLFIRE..
...PROMISING A WILD RIDE BEYOND THE NARROW NOTIONS OF GOOD AND EVIL!
CHAPTER THREE:
A LOVE SUPREME
FRAAARGH!


AHHH. MY ECTOPLASMIC FORM HAS COMPLETELY ABANDONED THE PHYSICAL PLANE -- NOW I MAY FULFILL THE REQUEST BLAZE BROUGHT TO US THIS EVENING..
...TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THE RECURRING NIGHTMARE HE CLAIMS HAS PARALYZED EVEN A GHOST RIPPER WITH FEAR...
...ASSUMING IT HAS A BOTTOM! HMMM... LONG FALL INTO A HOLLOW INFERNO... ECHOING SCREAMS OF THE UNREPENTANT...
...IF I SMELL BRIMSTONE NEXT, MY YOUNG FRIEND, I'LL DEEM YOUR DREAMSTUFF MOST STEREOTYPICAL!
"I THOUGHT I COULD AFFORD TO AMUSE MYSELF -- FOR IT WAS CLEA'S STEADY HAND THAT MAINTAINED THE STORM OF ENERGY BETWEEN OUR BODIES!
"ONCE WE BEGAN, I HAD WARNED HER, MY SPIRIT SELF COULD NOT EXIT THE DREAMSPACE TILL THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF JOHN BLAZE WILLED ME OUT!"
DON'T WORRY, STEPHEN -- I'LL NEVER LET YOU GO!


"OUTSIDE MY SANCTUM, THE STILLNESS OF THE NETHER-HOURS WAS OPPRESSIVE.. BUT CLEA KEPT HER FOCUS..
"..WHILE I BECAME MORE AND MORE RESTIVE!"
HOW COULD BLAZE TROUBLE THE SORCERER SUPREME WITH SUCH BANAL HORROR? THIS IS... FOOLISHNESS! NONSENSE!
"I CONFESS I STIFLED A YAWN AS I TUMBLED INTO THE MAW OF A ZARATHOS THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE COVER PAINTING FOR A HORROR VIDEOCASSETTE!
WHAT NOW? DO I BURN IN THE FIRE THAT DOES NOT CONSUME?
KNEEL FOR THE DEVIL'S KISS? BLAZE, THIS SCHOOLBOY PRANK IS BENEATH YOU!
"BUT, AS MY EYES ADJUSTED TO THOSE DECEPTIVELY PREDICTABLE STYGIAN HUES..


"...I KNEW! I HAD NOT BEEN INSULTED, BUT TRAPPED!"
ADMIT IT, MY PRECIOUS OLD ADVERSARY.. THIS TIME, I GOT YOU!
"DECEIVED BY THE HERETIC [redacted]!
"JUST AS HE NEVER GOT OVER LORD VARNAE'S CHOOSING A PRINCE OF WALLACHIA NAMED DRACULA HEIR APPARENT
"...VERDELET NEVER GOT OVER ME! THIS TIME, HOWEVER, THE DUEL WOULD BE ON THIS OBSESSIVE MADMAN'S GROUND, BOTH IN THE DREAMSPACE...
"...AND BACK IN THE REAL WORLD!"

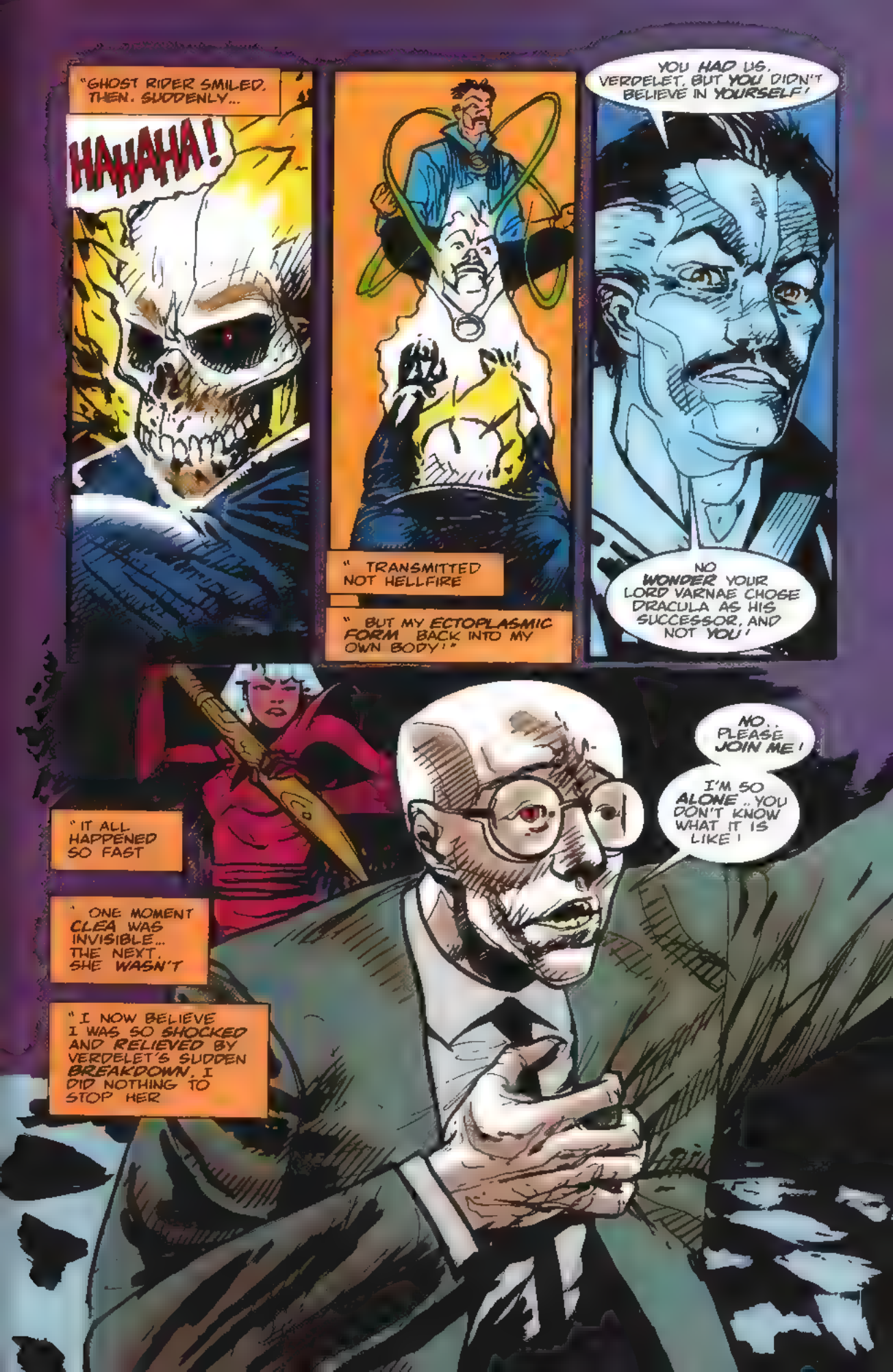
ADMIT IT...
WHAT? STEPHEN? NO!
"CLEA MUST HAVE BEEN SHOCKED WHEN THE STORMFLOW OF LIFE BETWEEN MY BODY, THE ATLANTEAN STAFF, AND GHOST RIDER ABRUPTLY CEASED!
"AS THE FLAMING SKULL TURNED STIFFLY TOWARD HER, A BLACK MIST WAFTED FROM WITHIN ITS LEATHERS!"
...MY PRECIOUS..
OLD ADVERSARY.
THIS TIME, I GOT YOU!
WE MAY HAVE MISSED SENSING YOU AMONG ALL THE ANOMALIES SURROUNDING BLAZE...
...BUT WE'VE GOT YOU!
VERDELET!
ATTACKING STEPHEN AND ME AT HOME WAS YOUR MOST HOPELESS GAMBIT YET!

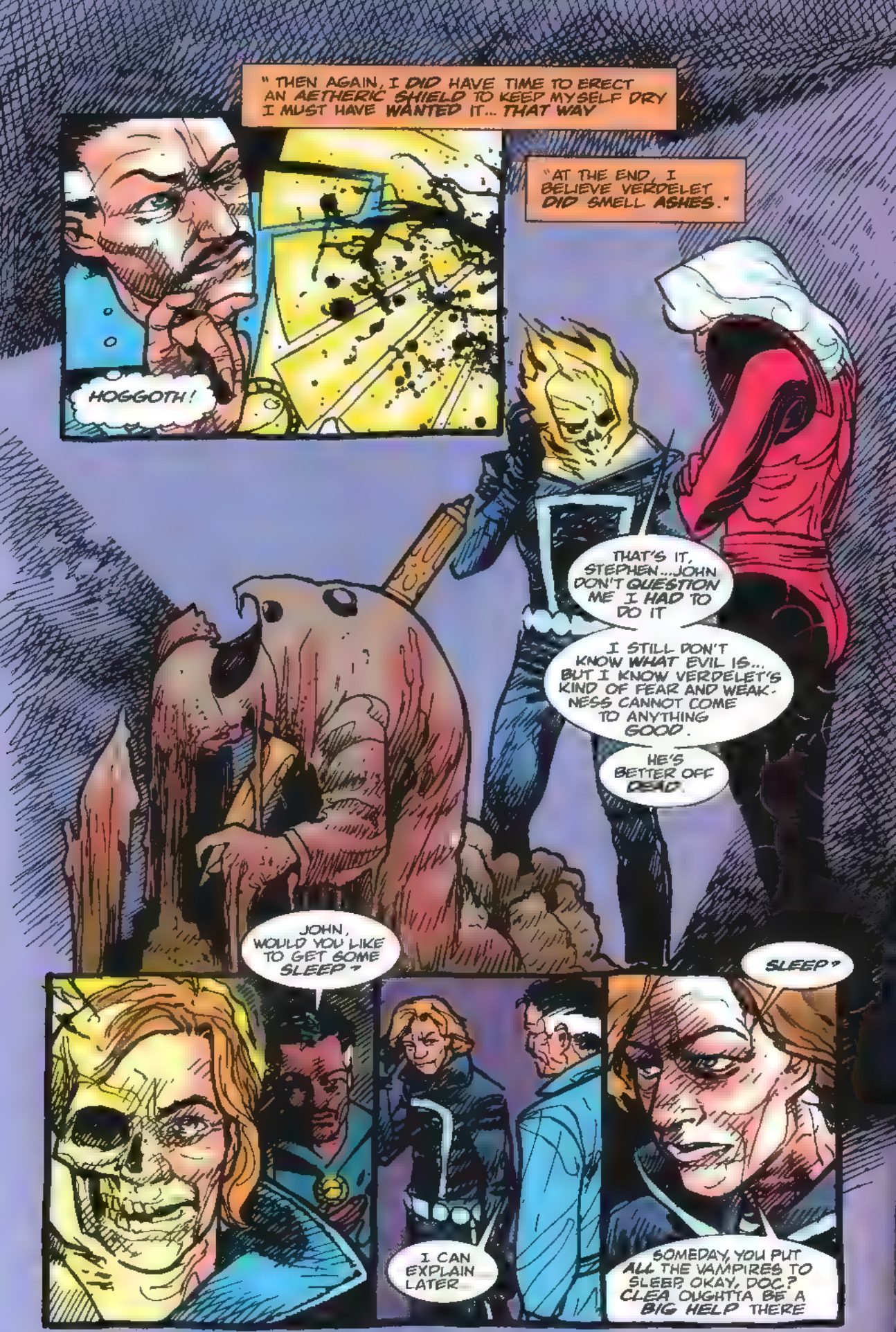
"CLEA TRIED TO STALL FOR TIME, TILL SHE SAW GHOST RIDER LURCH FORWARD LIKE A BROKEN TOY!"
DO NOT UNDERSTAND ME TOO QUICKLY, CLEA. THE PEDANTIC DOCTOR IS INDISPOSED... AND WE ARE QUITE ALONE!
AND SPEAKING OF GAMBIT, I HAVE OUTSTRIPPED THE ONE YOU USED AGAINST ME LAST TIME!
HERE'S ONE WE USED TO PLAY IN ATLANTIS -- GETTING INTO EACH OTHER'S DREAMS!
TAKING CONTROL OF JOHN BLAZE WAS CHILD'S PLAY ...SEE?
THE CRIMSON BANDS OF CYTTORAK WILL DEFLECT GHOST RIDER'S HELLFIRE!
BUT IF I REMAIN ON THE DEFENSIVE, I'LL NEVER STOP VERDELET!
COULD I UNNERVE HIM BY PRETENDING I AM STILL IN COMMUNICATION WITH STEPHEN?
AHHH, INVISIBLE.
CLEEEEAH, YOU MERELY DELAY THE INEVITABLE CONCLUSION OF OUR EVENING

YOU'RE NOT COOPERATING. CONSIDER THE HOLLOW SHELL OF THE GREAT DOCTOR STRANGE ...
...HOW LONG DO YOU THINK IT CAN WITHSTAND UNFETTERED HELLFIRE?
NO! I MUST ERECT A PROTECTIVE BARRIER—
IS IT JUST MY IMAGINATION, OR DO I SMELL A SLIGHTLY OVERDONE SORCERER?
"GLADLY WOULD I HAVE FELT GHOST RIDER'S FLAMES TO DEFEND CLEA -- BUT SHE HAD HER BATTLEGROUND...

"...AND I HAD MINE!"
CLEA BELONGS TO ME NOW, SORCERER!
WHAT SAY YOU TO THAT, MY DEAR STRANGE?
EXCUSE ME, VERDELET, BUT I FEEL HHHMMMMM...
...THE NEED TO... SLEEEEP...
WHAT?
I'LL NOT STAND FOR THIS! ON YOUR FEET, COWARD! FIGHT ME!
OH, IF YOU INSIST. I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT WAS YOU WHEN I PASSED THROUGH SUCH A DRY PURGATORY...
...COULDN'T YOU COME UP WITH SOMETHING THAT WOULD CHALLENGE A SORCERER SUPREME? WHY DO KEEP WASTING MY TIME, "OLD FRIEND"?
YOU DENIED ME FOR YEARS! JUST AS MARNAC PASSED ME OVER FOR THAT POMPOUS DRACULA!
BUT WHEN YOUR BODY BURNS, YOU WILL BE TRAPPED IN MY DREAM WITH ME...FOREVER!

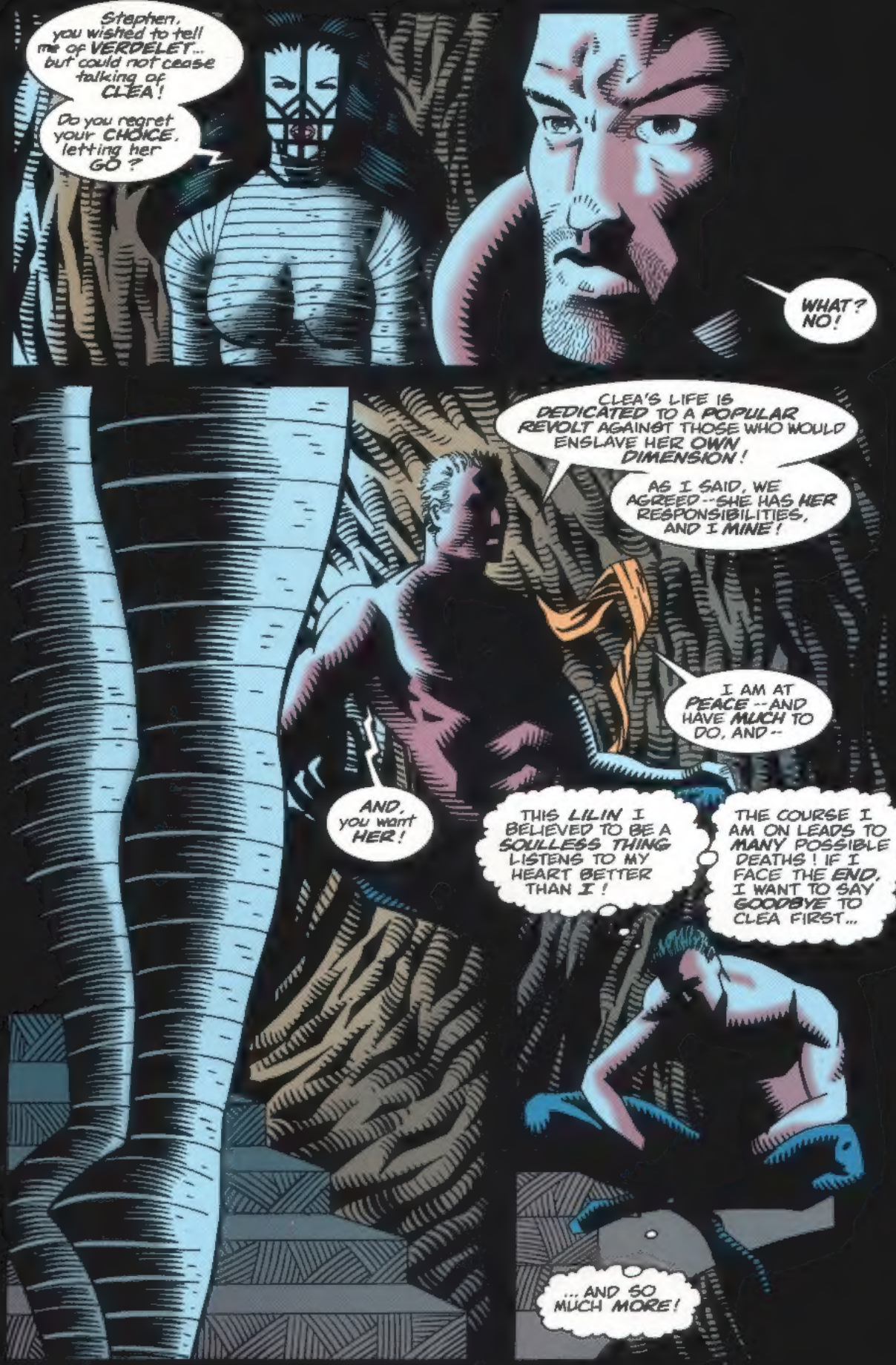
HEEEEY, HOW'S IT HANGIN', DOC?
JOHN--GOOD TO SEE YOU! CAN YOU BELIEVE VERDELET THOUGHT THIS WAS A NIGHT-MARE?
THIS FUNHOUSE RIDE?
NO WAY!
HAHAHA
YOU...YOU MOCK...LORD VERDELET? EVEN NOW? EVEN HERE?
"HOWEVER, BACK IN REALITY...
HAHAHA
"VERDELET HADN'T CRACKED YET!
"...GHOST RIDER'S HELLFIRE WAS NO LAUGHING MATTER!
GHOST RIDER! HARDER!
I WANT TO SMELL ASHES!


"GHOST RIDER SMILED. THEN. SUDDENLY...
HAHAHA!
" TRANSMITTED NOT HELLFIRE
" BUT MY ECTOPLASMIC FORM BACK INTO MY OWN BODY!"
YOU HAD US, VERDELET. BUT YOU DIDN'T BELIEVE IN YOURSELF!
NO WONDER YOUR LORD VARNAE CHOSE DRACULA AS HIS SUCCESSOR, AND NOT YOU!
" IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST
" ONE MOMENT CLEA WAS INVISIBLE... THE NEXT, SHE WASN'T
" I NOW BELIEVE I WAS SO SHOCKED AND RELIEVED BY VERDELET'S SUDDEN BREAKDOWN, I DID NOTHING TO STOP HER
NO.. PLEASE JOIN ME!
I'M SO ALONE.. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE!


" THEN AGAIN, I DID HAVE TIME TO ERECT AN AETHERIC SHIELD TO KEEP MYSELF DRY I MUST HAVE WANTED IT... THAT WAY
"AT THE END, I BELIEVE VERDELET DID SMELL ASHES."
HOGGOTH!
THAT'S IT, STEPHEN...JOHN DON'T QUESTION ME I HAD TO DO IT
I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT EVIL IS... BUT I KNOW VERDELET'S KIND OF FEAR AND WEAKNESS CANNOT COME TO ANYTHING GOOD.
HE'S BETTER OFF DEAD.
JOHN, WOULD YOU LIKE TO GET SOME SLEEP?
SLEEP?
I CAN EXPLAIN LATER
SOMEDAY, YOU PUT ALL THE VAMPIRES TO SLEEP, OKAY, DOC? CLEA OUGHTTA BE A BIG HELP THERE

GODSPEED, JOHN.
ME, I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD! LATER, FOLKS!
"AT DAWN, AS BLAZE RODE AWAY ON HIS BIKE, I LOOKED AT CLEA...
"...AND FOUND SHE WAS ALREADY LOOKING AT ME."
UH, CLEA...
...UH, HOW FAR WE HAVE COME SINCE WE FIRST MET VERDELET. WHAT I MEAN TO SAY IS, I--
I WASN'T ALWAYS AWARE HOW FORTUNATE I AM. I AM MORE ALIVE... WITH YOU... THAN I EVER IMAGINED I COULD BE!
"IT WASN'T EASY TO TELL HER THAT...
"...OR TO BIDE THOSE FEW ETERNAL SECONDS, AWAITING HER RESPONSE. AND THEN, SHE SMILED."

ALTHOUGH SISTER NIL IS MOVED BY WHAT IS, TO HER, AN UNPRECEDENTED DISPLAY OF HER CAPTOR'S EMOTION...
...SISTER NIL IS NOT SMILING.
I KNOW I CLAIMED... I DID NOT NEED CLEA...
...AND IN TRUTH, I DON'T!
SOMETIMES, HOWEVER, THAT TRUTH DOES NOT CONTRADICT THE CERTAINTY THAT I WANT HER.


Stephen, you wished to tell me of VERDELET... but could not cease talking of CLEA!
Do you regret your CHOICE, letting her GO?
WHAT? NO!
CLEA'S LIFE IS DEDICATED TO A POPULAR REVOLT AGAINST THOSE WHO WOULD ENSLAVE HER OWN DIMENSION!
AS I SAID, WE AGREED--SHE HAS HER RESPONSIBILITIES, AND I MINE!
I AM AT PEACE--AND HAVE MUCH TO DO, AND--
AND, you want HER!
THIS LILIN I BELIEVED TO BE A SOULLESS THING LISTENS TO MY HEART BETTER THAN I!
THE COURSE I AM ON LEADS TO MANY POSSIBLE DEATHS! IF I FACE THE END, I WANT TO SAY GOODBYE TO CLEA FIRST...
... AND SO MUCH MORE!

YES, THIS IS THE ONE, TRUE STEPHEN STRANGE!
BUT DO NOT FORGET-- HE IS A NEW MAN IN A NEW PLACE, FOR MANY REASONS...
...NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS THE DARK ENERGY OF SALOME'S DANCE WHICH PERMEATES HIS BODY, FIRING HIS EVERY EMOTION TO ITS VIOLENT EXTREME!
I HAVE MISSED OUT ON SO MUCH, SISTER NIL, PURSUING PATHS CHOSEN FOR ME... AS MAGICIAN AND WARRIOR!
WHEN I SEE CLEA AGAIN, AND I SENSE THAT WILL BE SOON...
...I WILL NOT SETTLE FOR LESS THAN FOLLOWING ALL PATHS -- NOT ONLY AS MAGICIAN AND WARRIOR, BUT ALSO... AS A MAN!
THE END